

Managing Wild Horses on Public Lands

By Bob Abbey



Credit: BLM

Bob Abbey is Director of the Bureau of Land Management and has more than 32 years of experience in public service for state and federal land-management agencies.

The Bureau of Land Management's top priority is to ensure that America's public lands are healthy and productive, both now and in the future, so that all species dependent on them—including our nation's wild horses and burros—can thrive. Under the BLM's multiple-use mission, as defined by Congress in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, wild horses and burros must share public lands with wildlife, livestock, and people who use the land for activities as varied as energy production, mineral development, and outdoor recreation. The BLM's overarching goal for wild horse and burro management is to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance on public lands.

One of the challenges we face in achieving a balance among all public land uses is that wild horse and burro herd sizes grow at an average rate of 20 percent a year—thus doubling in size every four years. Left unchecked, such rapid population growth places increasing demands on native plants and animals and the water sources that sustain them. Since wild horses have no natural predators to help slow their population growth, the BLM must round up and remove excess animals from western rangelands to maintain the appropriate management level (AML) of wild horses and burros. The AML is the estimated number of wild horses and burros that the land can support in balance with other resources and uses. Overpopulated wild horse and burro herds overuse the rangelands, put at risk the health of native wildlife and plants, reduce water quality, and threaten the health of the horses and burros themselves.

Today's on-the-range wild horse and burro population is 38,400, nearly 12,000 more than our public lands can support. To reach the AML of 26,600 animals, thousands of excess horses and burros need to be removed from public rangelands. Many of these animals will be placed in our adoption program or sold to buyers who can provide good homes. Unfortunately, the public demand for adoptable and sale-eligible wild horses has declined nearly 40 percent from 2005 to

2009, leaving some 37,800 animals (as of October 2010) in short-term corrals and private Midwestern pastures at a cost to taxpayers of millions of dollars per year.

Because of the BLM's spiraling holding costs for unadopted horses, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently found the Wild Horse and Burro Program to be at a "critical crossroads." In response, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and I announced a new initiative in October 2009 as the first step toward putting the program on a sustainable course. This entails identifying and developing additional options to improve the management of wild horses and burros while relying on the best science available to shape our decisions. Accordingly, we have asked the National Academy of Sciences/National Research Council to conduct an independent technical review of the Wild Horse and Burro Program and make recommendations about future management. In this effort, the NAS/NRC will review previously published data and study annual herd growth rates, population estimation and control methods, population limiting factors, and other subjects needing research.

Regrettably, activists seeking a moratorium on wild horse roundups have undertaken a coordinated campaign to mislead the public and distort the BLM's motives and intentions. With all due respect to the passion shown by horse activists, such a moratorium would be untenable. It would be devastating to the health of public rangelands and contrary to Section 1333 of the 1971 wild horse and burro law, which directs the BLM to determine whether an overpopulation of wild horses and burros exists, and, if so, to "immediately remove excess animals from the range so as to achieve appropriate management levels."

The Bureau is committed to the well-being of America's wild horses and burros, both on and off the range. By achieving appropriate management levels on western public rangelands, the BLM can ensure that healthy herds and healthy public lands will thrive for generations to come. ■